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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: KUWAIT MEDIA REACTION SPECIAL, JUNE 10: GOVERNMENT
FILES CHARGES AGAINST EDITOR-IN-CHIEF OF LEADING DAILY

REF: KUWAIT (C)02293

11. SUMMARY: All media report that Mohammed al-Jassim, the liberal editor-in-chief of Kuwaiti Arabic daily "Al Watan," was summoned to the office of the public prosecutor and charged with "contesting the authority of the Amir," a charge that can carry a five-year prison term, before being released on bail. Media reports allege that al-Jassim accused the ruling Al-Sabah family of interfering in the run-up to the July 5 parliamentary elections. In a front-page editorial in al-Watan, al-Jassim denies the charges as politically motivated.

Al-Jassim has led local media opposition to a proposed press law that would give the government wide powers to fine or close newspapers (reftel.) The charges against him have predictably unleashed a torrent of criticism by liberals and conservatives against the government, led by al-Jassim himself. "Referring me to the Public Prosecutor gives me the freedom to express my opinion," he writes in al-Watan. "I want this to be an opportunity to judge the current political situation in this country." END SUMMARY.

12. News Stories: All newspapers report on June 9 that editor-in-chief of Arabic daily Al-Watan and Arabic Newsweek, Mohammed Abdul-Qader Al-Jassim, was referred to the Public Prosecutor following statements he made in the diwaniya [men's gathering] of MP Jassim Al-Omar criticizing the ruling Al-Sabah family's alleged intervention in the run-up to the July 5 parliamentary elections.

On June 10, all newspapers report that Al-Jassim was released on bail. Al-Jassim is accused of contesting the authority of the Amir, a crime punishable by five years imprisonment. Al-Jassim denies the charges against him.

On Al-Watan's June 10 front page, Al-Jassim says in addressing the Amir: "I apologize to you for a crime that I have not committed."

Al-Rai Al-Am front pages on June 10 the Minister of Information, Ahmed Al-Fahd's comment on Al-Jassim's referral to the Public Prosecutor: "[Al-Jassim's referral] was not for an 'opinion crime,' and does not pertain to the press law, [but rather] to criminal issues that concern the Ministry of Interior."

Following are reported reactions by prominent Kuwaitis:

--Secretary General of the Islamic Constitutional Movement, Essa Majed Al-Shaheen argues that the decision "reflects the government's impatience with opposing views and leads us to fear for the future of freedom in Kuwait."

--Spokesman of the conservative Islamist Salafi Movement, Abdul-Razzak Al-Shayji, warns against government intervention in the elections, and states that the decision to prosecute Al-Jassim violates rights to free expression.

--Islamist MP Waleed Al-Tabtabaie feared that the decision would be the first step towards "muffling mouths," and called on the government to retract its decision.

--Liberal MP Abdul-Wahab Al-Haroun called the decision "a blatant violation of the constitution."

-- The Committee for the Defense of Freedom of Expression at the Kuwait Graduates' Society denounced the referral of Al-Jassim to the public prosecution on June 10.

Editorials:

12. "To Sheikh Sabah, with Best Regards"
Liberal Editor-in-Chief of Arabic daily Al-Watan and Arabic Newsweek, Mohammad Al-Jassim, wrote (6/9): "I understand the 'political' reasons which forced the government to refer

me to the Public Prosecutor. It is, however, a decision in my favor, since I will use it to stir public debate about what is happening in Kuwait. I did not violate any laws during the two seminars I participated in. I do admit, however, that my `sin' is having said something that displeased [Acting Prime Minister] Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad and those around him. The government wants to instill fear in my heart, and the hearts of others, in order to stop us from disclosing the ongoing machinations. If reforming the country could be accomplished by referring me to the Public Prosecutor, I would not mind if Sheikh Sabah referred me there ten times daily. Violating laws and listening to those with ill intentions is the road to destruction, not reform. I do not fear the Public Prosecutor's investigations or the courts, for I have spent over seventeen years in these same courts defending others. In fact, I feel homesick for this setting where one enjoys freedom of expression without political grudges. Referring me to the Public Prosecutor gives me the freedom to my opinion. I want this to be an opportunity to judge the current political situation in this country. I will say what my conscious dictates, without hesitation, regardless of who is pleased or displeased."

14. "No To Violating Freedom of Expression"
Liberal Editor-in-Chief of Arabic daily Al-Qabas, Waleed Al-Nesf wrote (6/9): "We did not expect the government to take such severe action against the freedom of expression and opinion. Regardless of our differences of opinion with Al-Jassim, we strongly reject any infringement on the right to free expression. In real democratic countries, elections are the most important occasion for candidates and voters to express their opinions on the future of their country. We hope the government has not taken such action against a citizen just for expressing his opinion. Such an action is wrong and unjustified."

15. "Do Not Make It a Prison Without Walls"
Fouad Al-Hashem wrote in independent Al-Watan (6/9): "The referral of Al-Jassim to the Public Prosecutor. is the result of the . newly proposed press law. What Al-Jassim said does not constitute a quarter of what is said in the diwanis [weekly men's gatherings]. What has happened to us? Have we lost our patience [with differing opinions]? The free world is watching, so don't make these nations regret having shed blood for our freedom, and for having stood up to dictators to preserve our democracy. Don't turn Kuwait into a prison without walls."

16. "President Bush, Thanks For Not Visiting Us"
Liberal Managing Editor Waleed Al-Jassim wrote in independent Al-Watan (6/9): "Thank you Mr. President for not visiting us. We hope that you won't visit us any time soon. Some may believe that I have suddenly turned against America, but this is not true. Had the President visited Kuwait, he would have heard about the government's attempts to prevent freedom of expression, even during election seminars-- one of the few remaining forms of democracy. What Al-Jassim said is what people say in their homes and at diwanis. The government's calculations are mistaken, as usual, for this decision is turning into a public call for freedom of expression."

17. "The Smell of Injustice Will Not Spread"
Liberal Editor-in-Chief of Arabic daily Al-Watan and Arabic Newsweek, Mohammad Al-Jassim, wrote (6/10): "Kuwait today is different from what people knew in the past because politics have contaminated [the country] and the smell of injustice had spread. The accusations against me can create a bad image of Kuwait. However, Kuwait's image will not change, and balance will be restored. With the return of the political balance, the dust of agitation and hypocrisy that obstructs vision will subside."

18. "Refer Us All To The Prosecutor"
Mubarak Al-Hajiri wrote in independent Al-Watan (6/10): "At the same time as Kuwait is hosting the first Arab Media Forum [held in Kuwait from June 7-10], we notice that our government has disregarded transparency and is extending its long arm to muffle mouths of people who are attempting to find remedies for [Kuwait's] chronic sickness. We do not want to be afraid to express our opinions, especially if our opinions are aimed at reform. We stand beside Al-Jassim and reject and condemn such actions against him."